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Playbill for The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin

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THE DR. IS IN by Mervyn Rothstein

Kelsey Grammer, television's favorite therapist, takes a break from "Frasier" to star on Broadway in a new production of Macbeth

Kelsey Grammer isn't superstitious. Here he is on Broadway, after 16 years as the narcissistic psychiatrist Frasier Crane on "Cheers" and "Frasier," starring in the forbidding role of Shakespeare's Macbeth. It is a play so legendary for bringing bad luck to actors that mentioning its title anywhere in a theatre - it is usually referred to only as "the Scottish play" - is looked on with horror by performers everywhere. But not by Grammer.

"It's a lucky play for me," he says. "I acted in it almost 20 years ago at Lincoln Center. It was 1981, and I was playing Lennox and understudying Philip Anglim as Macbeth. Philip got sick, and I got to play the role for six weeks. I was the understudy, and suddenly I had the lead role."

It was that production, the 45-year-old Grammer says, that made him want to try again. "I've been talking about it for a long time. I was 25 then, and I was too young. I made some mistakes that I wanted to make right. So this winter my wife, Camille, and I were reading scripts for movies, and the parts that were coming up that might have been possible for me to do over the summer were not catching my eye. Then one night, as we were sitting in bed, she said, 'Maybe it's time you did Macbeth.'"

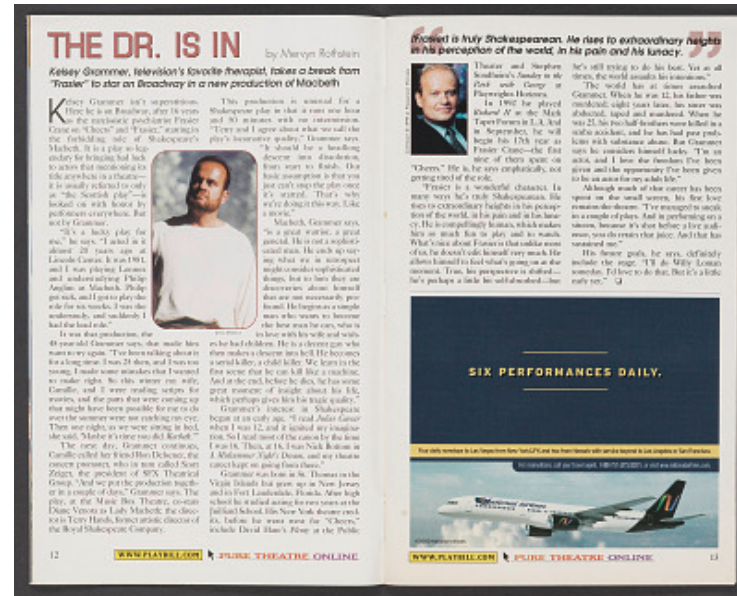
The next day, Grammer continues, Camille called her friend Ron Delsener, the concert promoter, who in turn called Scott Zeiger, the president of SFX Theatrical Group. "And we put the production together in a couple of days," Grammer says. The play, at the Music Box Theatre, co-stars Diane Venora as Lady Macbeth; the director is Terry Hands, former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

[[image: color photo of Kelsey Grammer as Macbeth]]

This production is unusual for a Shakespeare play in that it runs one hour and 50 minutes with no intermission. "Terry and I agree about what we call the play's locomotive quality," Grammer says. "It should be a headlong descent into dissolution, from start to finish. Our basic assumption is that you just can't stop the play once it's started. That's why we're doing it this way. Like a movie."

Macbeth, Grammer says, "is a great warrior, a great general. He is not a sophisticated man. He ends up saying what we in retrospect might consider sophisticated things, but to him they are discoveries about himself that are not necessarily profound. He begins as a simple man who wants to become the best man he can, who is in love with his wife and wishes he had children. He is a decent guy who then makes a descent into hell. He becomes a serial killer, a child killer. We learn in the first scene that he can kill like a machine. And at the end, before he dies, he has some great moment of insight about his life, which perhaps gives him his tragic quality."

Grammer's interest in Shakespeare began at an early age. "I read Julius Caesar when I was 12, and it ignited my imagination. So I read most of



the canon by the time I was 16. Then, at 16, I was Nick Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and my theatre career kept on going from there."

Grammer was born in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands but grew up in New Jersey and in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After high school he studied acting for two years at the Juilliard School. His New York theatre credits, before he went west for "Cheers," include David Hare's Plenty at the Public

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[[pull quote]] "(Frasier) is truly Shakespearean. He rises to extraordinary heights in his perception of the world, in his pain and his lunacy." [[/pull quote]]

[[image: head shot photo of Kelsey Grammer]]
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Theater and Stephen Sondheim's Sunday in the Park with George at Playwrights Horizons.

In 1992 he played Richard II at the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. And in September, he will begin his 17th year as Frasier Crane - the first nine of them spent on "Cheers." He is, he says emphatically, not getting tired of the role.

"Frasier is a wonderful character. In many ways he's truly Shakespearean. He rises to extraordinary heights in his perception of the world, in his pain and in his lunacy. He is compellingly human, which makes him so much fun to play and to watch. What's nice about Frasier is that unlike most of us, he doesn't edit himself very much. He allows himself to feel what's going on at the moment. True, his perspective is shifted - he's perhaps a little bit self-absorbed - but he's still trying to do his best. Yet at all times, the world assaults his intentions."

The world has at times assaulted Grammer. When he was 12 his father was murdered; eight years later, his sister was abducted, raped and murdered. When he was 25, his two half-brothers were killed in a scuba accident, and he has had past problems with substance abuse. But Grammer says he considers himself lucky. "I'm an actor, and I love the freedom I've been given and the opportunity I've been given to be an actor for my adult life."

Although much of that career has been spent on the small screen, his first love remains the theatre. "I've managed to sneak in a couple of plays. And in performing on a sitcom, because it's shot before a live audience, you do retain that juice. And that has sustained me."

His future goals, he says, definitely include the stage. "I'll do Willy Loman someday. I'd love to do that. But it's a little early yet."

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